

### **Re-thinking the sex/gender distinction - Lessons from Simone de Beauvoir**

Beauvoir's famous statement "Women was not born but becomes one" (1974:301) inspired the sex/gender distinction and confirmed her reputation as the mother of second wave feminism. "Becoming a woman" she insists is a social process, hence eschewing the fear that biology was destiny. However inspirational Beauvoir was to the second wave feminism of the 1960's it is a mistake to see her as an exemplar of the second wave, for she has a very different reading of the sexed body and a different approach to the gendering process. She did not bracket the body, nor see it as neutral or irrelevant to the process of becoming a woman: nor did she see the biological body as determinant. For Beauvoir, the body is not encased in its skin, but is a dynamic threshold onto the world. The body is the point of contact with the world, the means by which we experience the world and others, and the medium of our expression. Anatomical and physiological aspects are as relevant as the cultural and socio-economic factors in shaping a gendered bodily being. She thereby eschews the equally unsatisfactory alternatives of naturalism – which assumes there is a stable body whose facts are knowable through science and its stark alternative - social constructivism – which assumes these facts are socially and culturally constructed. The former interpretation - that assumes the body can be known through objective scientific truths and that historical, cultural aspects of embodiment do not figure - is shortsighted. Ignoring the contributions of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and phenomenology in the process. The latter social constructivist reading makes short shrift of biology, neurophysiology, transcultural structures of experience and ontological speculations, treating of all these discourses on par. Amongst others the findings of neuroscience, theorists of affect would challenge this stance. Even many poststructuralists, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler have insisted that the body matters. Grosz has identified "a strange de-corporealization" and "neutralization of the body"<sup>1</sup> by those feminists who insist upon the discursivization of bodies. She goes on to say, "analyses of the representation of bodies abound, but bodies in their material variety still wait to be thought." (1995, 31)

While Beauvoir is critical of the methods of objective science and the neutrality of social science, she nonetheless believes that science and social science are useful resources. In *America Day by Day* she provides a phenomenological description of the racism in America as well as applauding Gunnar Myrdal's social scientific work on race. These studies can be revealing without assuming they produce objective and impartial truths. This research informs her understanding of the social/ political world. She does not believe that the scientific method of social science produces apodictic certainty and objective truth, but Myrdal's work helps her understand American racism. Beauvoir has an ambivalent relationship with science. In an early essay on Claude Bernard she expresses her interest in him as a scientific experimenter, who does not try to master nature, but submits his ideas to nature. Beauvoir echoes Bernard: an exaggerated belief in theory enslaves the mind, taking away the mind's freedom and smothering originality<sup>2</sup> as well this theoreticist approach fails to disclose the world. The world does not pre-exist its various disclosures, and while it may be constituted and interpreted through theory, not all discourses are equally able to disclose the world. Beauvoir thus eschews scholasticism and system building, whether it be

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Grosz (1995) *Space, Time and Perversion*, Routledge, London, p.31

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough Hannah Arendt revealed her concern that who are in love with their theories lose sight of the real world.

philosophic or social scientific in form. For her theories always presume the experiencing embodied self cannot deny ambiguity or the processal nature of subjectivity, the subject is becoming, and the world in which one acts, is always opened, inviting multiple readings.

Social constructivism, which follows from the sex/gender distinction seeing the body as a social and cultural artifact, tends to marginalize the significance of the physiological and bio-chemical bodily processes. Beauvoir respects the body as a cultural social artifact, however she also goes some way to appreciate transcultural features of embodiment. The kind of bodily structures that Beauvoir appreciates are akin to Merleau-Ponty's figure/ground schema. Since the embodied subject is always historically and socially situated, the self as figure is dependent upon the ground as situation. Hence the forms of embodiment and its situation are not separate, this eschews positivist theories and relativist conclusions. Merleau-Ponty, in *The Phenomenology* also points to the significance of anatomical features that one's hands move towards a maximal grasp on things, that the living body strives towards life and avoids death. These existential insights frame bodily experiences, which are presumed to be transcultural. If the body is constituted via discourses, it is assumed it can be re-written by shifting cultural meanings. But if one has cancer, clearly, the meaning of cancer and the capacity to re-write or configure its meaning is culturally construed, but the effects on the body are more resistant to cultural/social change.

The social constructivists who assume that the negative aspects of women's existence could be written out of women's life by changing how she is socialized, educated, participates in public life encounters some problems. An example of the shortcomings of social constructivism is offered where a baby boy's penis was removed accidentally in a surgical intervention at 7 months, 1972. The doctor and the child's family decided to raise him as a girl. At 22 months old the child was surgically reassigned as a girl and brought up according to the prevailing view at the time that we are psychosexually neutral at birth. His testicles were surgically removed and an artificial vagina created, as is done in sex-change operations. John became Joan and was given hormonal therapy. This case entered the textbooks and informed medical opinion for several decades because Money reported that the child had adapted well as a girl. But long term follow up of this case by Milton Diamond paints a very different picture of the success, Joan rebelled against his identity before puberty, and felt like a boy and lived as a man, ultimately marrying a woman who had children.<sup>3</sup>

This project no doubt was inspired by the belief that gender trumps sex, one's gender identity is a product of one's environment, how one is raised, thereby underplaying the affects of biological differences. He struggled against with his 'manufactured' identity for some time and was relieved to find out what had happened. These experts did not give enough weight to other biological features that bear sexed differences, his hormones, and genetic material. Even though his body was reconstructed as a girl and he was given the same treatment as one would in sex change, he never felt comfortable in his skin.

This experiment seems to suggest that anatomy drives one's sexuality. Psychoanalysis offers some reflections on this, contesting theories that assume anatomy drives sexuality and equally contest the belief that we can be re-socialized or simply re-programmed to overcome our former selves or former bodily morphologies. Identification and dis-identification is important, as is our

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<sup>3</sup> The Times, March 15 1997, by Nigel Hawkes.

bodily sexed being; it is not simply a social product. There is something more intractable about the biological/ physiological/ and somatic processes that is not captured in social constructivism. Most recently work on neuro-science has shown that the brain functioning affects memory and ability to focus and creatively think and complete tasks, it is not simply the product of will, or random discourses, on the contrary, is linked to somatic processes. Here too the reduction of the body to social processes is challenged. More recently psychoanalysts who traditionally respect the constructivism of the psyche are beginning to accommodate the insights of neuro-science. Sue Gerhardt- Brunner<sup>4</sup> is a case in point. She weaves together neuro-science and psychoanalysis. Since the prefrontal cortex develops in the first year of life with touch and support, those babies whose need for care are not met (i.e. the Rumanian orphans) have an almost a blank prefrontal cortex, this physiological deficiency makes the management of emotions very difficult indeed. Is it not just a question of desire and social/psychic identification that underpins one's subjectivity, but again the body matters. Beauvoir's appeal to scientific theories is significant, yet she too appreciates that the biological facts are given social/ cultural meanings.

### The Poststructuralist Challenge

Poststructuralist feminists have challenged the sex/gender distinction of second wave feminists by de-stabilizing the assumption of a 'natural sexed body' as distinct from social gendering processes. Beauvoir has been a common target for their critique. Judith Butler is more appreciative of Beauvoir than most poststructuralists, however she too wrongly believes that Beauvoir upholds the classic sex/gender distinction. The Beauvoirian body is conceived of as "a passive surface or site" of 'natural' facts (sex) upon which social norms and practices (gender) are played out. (Butler, 1993: 4) It is treated as a stable foundation or residual facticity outside of, or prior to the social. As we have seen Beauvoir does not assume there is a pre-social or pre-cultural body, but nor does she believe that the body is reducible to the social/ cultural register. Before we proceed to understand Beauvoir's treatment of sex/gender; nature/ culture dualities in more detail let us take up further detail of the post-structural critiques.

Beauvoir is charged with somatophobia<sup>5</sup> that manifests itself in a visceral disgust and fear of the body, and in particular woman's body. It is also believed that her thinking reflects the male's

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<sup>4</sup> Sue Gerhardt- Brunner, *Why Love Matters*, Routledge, London, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Poststructuralist feminists (Luce Irigaray, Tina Chanter and Elizabeth Grosz) have pointed to Beauvoir's visceral disgust with woman's body as symptomatic of a philosophic humanism that disparages bodiliness and celebrates rationality. In employing universal philosophic categories of being in itself and being for itself they believe she fails to respect sexual difference. In fact, they insist de Beauvoir wants liberated women to emulate men, for their sexuality and their bodies are impediments to their freedom. See Luce Irigaray, **Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference**, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge. 1993) Irigaray decries de Beauvoir's "wish to get rid of sexual difference, as a call for genocide more radical than any form of destruction there ever has been in human history" (12). This extreme indictment of Beauvoir contrasts with Chanter's more modest claim that "Beauvoir's final message is that sexual differences should be eradicated and women must become more like men" (76) in **The Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers** (New York) Routledge, 1995). Elizabeth Grosz in **Volatile bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism** (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994) believes that de Beauvoir flees the female body since it inherently limits "women's capacity for equality.... In so far as woman adopts the role of mother her access to the public, social sphere is made difficult if not impossible and the equalization of the roles of the two sexes is nonsensical." Susan Hekman identifies the contradictions in de Beauvoir's position. She insists that women's body and her reproductive function are the source of her subordination and yet that "woman is not born but made." **Gender and Knowledge: elements of a postmodern**

point of view. If we fully appreciate the problematic of embodied subjectivity, Beauvoir avoids the traps of second wave feminism and the charges of somatophobia and its correspondent evil – rationalism, exemplar of the modernist male point of view.

Beauvoir's feminism has frequently been dismissed by her poststructuralist critics as humanist – universalist, rationalist<sup>6</sup> and 'indifferent to difference.'<sup>7</sup> So it is with some irony that I offer her theoretical problematic of the situation and embodied subjectivity as a timely response to her poststructuralist critic's theoretical reductiveness.<sup>8</sup> This problematic appreciates the material side of the body- the anatomical, biological registers as well as a whole range of social differences that theorists of phallogocentrism do not.

Characterizing Beauvoir as a voluntary individualist, an existential modernist that celebrates the capacity of individuals (men in particular) to willfully transcend their bodies and their situations, misses the mark. So too, does the assumption that woman's body is an impediment to her liberation - closer to nature and further from culture - and therefore inferior to the disembodied male subject. These conventional readings of Beauvoir ignore her theoretical problematic of embodied subjectivity, the body as situation, and the historically nuanced treatment of the philosophic categories transcendence and immanence, being- for -itself and being -in -itself. These categories are not essential, mapped onto female and male lives, but much more complex given the specific historical and social situation that women find themselves within.

Beauvoir attributes her theory of embodied subjectivity to Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. She states that "the body is not as a thing, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting - that of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty; it is our grasp (*point d'apui*) upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects." (1974:38) When *point d'apui* is translated as

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**feminism.** (Cambridge MA: Routledge, 1990) Toril Moi in **What is a Woman?** (Oxford : Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000) is much more sympathetic to de Beauvoir's project, however she too identifies a negative treatment of bodiliness (designating it as the "trouble in the body" or "the body as trap.") and its theoretical tension with her social constructivism. I will differentiate my reading of Beauvoir from these interpretations.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 1. The portrayal of Beauvoir as a humanist feminist guilty of universalism and rationalism has prevailed amongst poststructuralists. There are exceptions and Judith Butler is one. In **Gender Trouble** (1990) Butler is critical of Beauvoir's voluntarist theory of gender. In **Bodies that Matter** (1993) she qualifies that criticism and acknowledges the importance of Beauvoir's notion of "project" to understand gender as performance (strategy) and avoid the logic of social determinism and formalism. Butler is critical of those feminists who assume the body is "passively determined, constructed by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogocentric language that precedes and determines the subject itself." Without naming Cixous and Irigaray she distinguishes herself from their formalist theories of phallogocentrism and approves of Beauvoir's account of "how gender is individually reproduced and reconstituted." (Butler, 1986: 36). In spite of her appreciation of Beauvoir, Butler wrongly ascribes to her the classic Anglo-American sex/gender distinction, which treats the body as a "passive surface outside the social" (Butler, 1993,4). This reading of Beauvoir misconstrues the relation between culture and nature. For de Beauvoir the body is not a passive surface or site, but an intertwining of the biophysical, social, sexual and the socio-economic fields of experience.

<sup>7</sup> See Elaine Stavro, *L'art de la difference* in *Cinquantenaire du Deuxieme Sexe*. dir.Christine Delphy & Sylvie Chaperon, Syllepse, Paris, 2002, 165-172. Here I make the argument that de Beauvoir uses philosophic language in a historically sensitive manner, and is able to account for a whole range of social differences and experiences that theorists of phallogocentrism are not.

<sup>8</sup> Given the hostility between Beauvoir and her poststructuralist interlocutors (Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous and Fouque) their theoretical differences have often been exaggerated and their theoretical affinities under explored.

instrument, rather than grasp, it eschews the intimate connection between body and world, and presumes an instrumental relation to the world, a relation which occludes the interconnectedness and mutual permeability of the body and world. When translated as our point of contact with world, the body is a threshold onto the world. This later translation sees the subject as more responsive to the world and less purposive and in its relations. This dovetails with Bergoffen's attention to Beauvoir's erotic generosity, the body as optimally open and permeable to others.<sup>9</sup>

We saw this connection of being and Being in Beauvoir's indebtedness to Heidegger, her emphasis on the body as disclosing/revealing being. From Beauvoir's notion of body as situation, we see that the body is not ontologically opposed to the world, it isn't matter as opposed to mind or spirit, but rather their entwining. Merleau-Ponty believes the flesh of the embodied subject engages the flesh of the world, through reversibility the body is capable of transcending some of its forms. It is both a site upon which transcultural physiological structures, biological facts, cultural forms, social and economic relations are inscribed and a medium of their articulation. As a medium the body is neither a mirror nor a blank slate upon which the social is arbitrarily inscribed. Rather as I have said, she respects the existential and transcultural structures- the organizing structures of the body (the figure/field gestalt) delimit what is possible. How are these theorized, they are not material, but nor are they socially and culturally relative. They have a role to play in perception and action. Quoting Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir insists that one must understand "the conditions without which the very fact of existence would seem impossible." (1974:7) Theorizing innate, acquired and cross cultural structures of bodily experiences avoids the overly discursivized body as well as the assumption that the body is prediscursive, presuming stable facts. Beauvoir is not culpable of Butler's critique, insisting that one's structures of experience are not natural, but utterly social and cultural in character. So the body involves the co-mingling of the natural and cultural, the ontological and social. In doing so Beauvoir avoids the ahistorical and naturalist body that is often attributed to phenomenology as well as the socially constructivist body that plagues many poststructuralist thinkers.

Other glib labels that are attached to Beauvoir's feminism are "phallic" (Kristeva, 2008) *Le Nouvel Observateur*, (Jan 08) and "egalitarian" (Grosz, 15) both feminists foreground the inherent limitations of Beauvoir's feminist theorizing. Granted, Beauvoir is concerned with equality, with providing opportunities for women to participate in public life and the economic world as equal participants; however these measures, are not equalizing in the sense of making women the same as men, which is a slip that the poststructuralists continually make. Further they assume Beauvoir insists woman take her place in man's world. While Beauvoir calls for engagement in this world she stresses the need to transcend it through revolutionary changes. Again her egalitarian proposals will not make the world the same for all, but allow women to live an equally meaningful way of life. Since her poststructuralist critics read Beauvoir through the poststructuralist lens of phallogocentrism, they have all too readily assumed she endorsed the detached masculine subject of modernity. As we have seen this is not so. In spite of her negative feelings around women's desiring and reproducing bodies, her problematic of embodied agency allows an openness to others and responsiveness to the world that eschews such negative sentiments regarding the female body. One cannot ignore her pejorative sentiments around the female body, one cannot not ignore that under present patriarchal practices and institutions

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<sup>9</sup> This is a far cry from Sartre's and the radical feminism of Mackinnon who are troubled by the boundary violations of the body and prefer the certainty of the conscious, rational communicable world.

women's body is defined by the needs/ desires of men, and hence women are alienated from it, but I interpret these statements not as essential and universal, but rather as specific historical judgments about women's bodies in subordinate relations. Beauvoir does not see women's bodies destined to their current social and cultural meanings. In fact she looks forward to world in which woman is subject and a new female imaginary, a non-phallic order, will emerge and reconfigure her relation to her body. Beauvoir anticipates a world in which women are fully engaged in public life, treated reciprocally in their social and sexual relations. She does not believe that woman's body is necessarily an impediment to the possibility of reciprocity, but it is so in its present configuration.

### Collapsing of the sex/gender distinction

Clearing away the parodied readings of Beauvoir allows us to appreciate her in a new light. Her novel treatment of bodily being is worth rethinking in light of the contemporary critiques of the sex/gender distinction.<sup>10</sup> Far from subscribing to the classic sex/gender distinction of second wave feminism often ascribed to her, Beauvoir allows for the conceptualization of bodily being as being interimbricated by biological, cultural and social registers of experience. The interpenetration of the psyche and the soma, the mind and body, biology and culture are respected, in addition the larger socio-economic and political forces are also articulated in her understanding of embodiment.

For Judith Butler the sexed body is conceived of "not as a fact nor a static condition," but is produced through the forcible reiteration of norms, "a process whereby regulatory norms materialize sex." Consequently sex is always influenced by gender: multiple discourses intersect and conflict with each other, however heterosexuality is privileged. The prevailing social norms of our liberal democratic capitalist society supports heterosexual sexual relations maximizing reproduction and producing the stable social relations of marriage and fidelity. Heterosexuality is just that sort of sexual relation.

In **Gender Trouble** Butler believes "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all," (1990:7) however her own example of gender performance requires such a differentiation. The male drag queen subverts sexual stereotypes, but relies on the contrast between male bodies (sex) and feminine behavior and women's clothes (gender) to do so.<sup>11</sup> It can thus be seen that gender performance relies upon the connection between sex, bodies and gender. This attests to the need to distinguish between sexualized and gendered experiences rather than conflating them as Butler does.

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<sup>10</sup> Monin Rahman and Anne Witz "What really matters? The concept of the material in feminism" (paper delivered, University of Toronto, May 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Toril Moi, in **What is a Woman?** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000) draws our attention to this shortcoming. p 53

Judith Butler and Joan Scott further insist that the scientific recognition of multiple sexes (some say five) will challenge the heterosexual binary of two sexes. This they argue would disrupt the hetero-reality and thereby have a progressive political effects. I am less convinced that the mere admission of this scientific fact would translate into a more tolerant or sexually liberated society. Such a position assumes biological or sexual facts drive social norms and practices. Regardless of what sexualized facts are revealed, even those that challenge heterosexism, they could be used to promote intolerance and sustain heteronormativity. This underscores the need to distinguish sexualized and gendered processes<sup>12</sup> - sexual identities don't necessarily translate into gendered realities. New social norms and political and economic practices that de-centre the nuclear family and heterosexual practices would be required to move beyond heteronormativity. For this reason a more complicated body with different registers of sexuate and gender experiences is in order.

Rejecting the sex/gender distinction the psychoanalytically inclined poststructuralist feminists preferred to see the body as an effect of sexual difference. Irigaray insists on the irreducibility of sexual difference in the present and future. By focusing on sexed differences and eschewing the distinctness of a register of gender, Irigaray is prone to a theory of sexual pervasiveness. Thereby obfuscating the effects of social institutions and social norms on sex. For the Lacanians the subject becomes one by taking up a linguistic position in a phallogocentric libidinal economy, this has the effect of reducing the social to the psychic and symbolic. This gives little space to other forms of sociality to affect subjectivity – the effects of social roles, organizations and institutions will be epiphenomenal. For Lacan, either you carry the phallus or not, assume agency or deny it. This approach tends to squeeze differences in race, ethnicity and class into a sexualized register, which is not entirely appropriate. While it is suggestive to assume a masterful and domineering stance towards others would involve scapegoating and the treatment of them as abject, this doesn't sufficiently attend to kind of exclusions experiences due to race, class, ethnicity. Beauvoir's concept of alterity (a symbolic register that privileges the agency of majority men and renders subordinate or Other the experiences of women) tries to appreciate different forms of marginalized and demeaned existences without sexualizing these experiences.

One of the criticisms launched by the poststructuralists is that the categories of sex and gender encourage binary realities, endorsing simple distinctions between male and female; nature and culture; biology and socio-economy. Beauvoir does more to challenge these simple dualities than has been assumed. Take for example her work on sexual reproduction. In Part 1 *Destiny*, Chapter 1, *The Data of Biology of The Second Sex*, she denies strong distinctions between the male and female sexes, unlike Irigaray, who as I have said insists upon the irreducibility of sexual difference. Beauvoir draws our attention to the asexual reproduction amongst lower species and the presence of intersexuality and hermaphrodites in animals and humans. She insists that human reproduction doesn't require two sexes.

The perpetuation of the species does not necessitate sexual differentiation. True enough, this differentiation is characteristic of existence to such an extent that it belongs in any realistic definition of existence. But it nevertheless remains true that both a mind without a body and an immortal man are strictly inconceivable, whereas we can imagine a parthenogenetic or hermaphroditic society. (1974 : 8 )

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Witz astutely describes the problem of these new philosophies of the body that “lose distinctive grip on the complex more - than - fleshy sociality that the concept gender gives a purchase on” (Witz, 2000,6-7)

Beauvoir attends to the biological and cultural domains as distinct though related. She uses both scientific findings and cultural myths both to make her case regarding the role of the two sexes in reproduction. In primitive matriarchal societies the father was believed to play no part in conception; somehow ancestral spirits with living germs inseminated women. From Aristotle to Hegel up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century she traces the arguments of philosophers and scientists who imagined that man was the active in procreation and woman passive. 17<sup>th</sup> century scientists imagined that “woman were restricted to the nourishment of an active, living principle already preformed in perfection without her. An illustration of this was to be found in Hartsaker, a Dutchman who drew a picture of a” homunculous” hidden in the spermatozoon in 1694. The idea of the sperm as being the positive, creative force persisted long after scientists had challenged these ideas. (1974:9)

Beauvoir both relies upon science to challenge the sexist readings of reproduction, but also recognizes that science also has contributed to sexist attitudes. She resorts to experiments in parthenogenesis to challenge the masculinist version of reproduction that pervades popular culture and some scientific theory. Drawing from non-sexist science of her day she sees the sperm as simply a physical-chemical reagent, like an acid that initiates the cleavage of the egg, it is not a positive creative force. Contemporary science discovers both gametes fusing in the fertilized egg; both are suppressed in becoming a new whole, so both are active and reactive (1974:14). However, in popular science, she sees the persistence of sexist representations: the egg as quiescent and the sperm as vital.

Beauvoir resists bimorphic sexed identity and complicates the reproductive process: “we can only hope to grasp the significance of sexuality by studying it in its concrete manifestations; and then perhaps the meaning of the word female will stand revealed.” (1974:10) Since sexual and asexual reproduction appear, she believes, there is no grounds to assume the former is considered basic or more fundamental.

After looking at the concrete manifestations of sex, as Beauvoir represents it, the sex/gender distinction does not hold up. This is also true when Beauvoir looks at the social processes, institutions and the notion of the “‘feminine woman’ or the eternal feminine. “The chief misunderstanding underlying this line of interpretation is that it is *natural* for the female human being to make herself a *feminine* woman: it is not enough to be a heterosexual, even a mother, to realize this ideal; “the true woman” is an “artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed “instincts” for coquetry, docility, are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man. Man as a matter of fact, does not always accept this virile vocation; and woman has good reason for accepting with even less docility the one assigned to her. (1974: 456)” Femininity is not derived from biological or sexual facts, for her docility, coquetry are the products of society, as is phallic pride, she says. There is some expectation that woman will emulate the ideal of femininity: but there are good reasons for women to refuse the norms and ideals of the “true woman.” Beauvoir recognizes the role of the individual in making this choice: some women try to embody the feminine ideal, whereas others do not. (1976:456) Beauvoir hopes that women will refusing this identity.

Beauvoir describes the *feminine* identity, as a cultural construction, it is not just given, but must be taken up and lived. It is a process, consisting of roles and norms that are lived or refused.



However, at the same time, she admits that these gender roles connect up with larger socio-economic and political projects –whether socialist, capitalist or anti-colonial in nature. In order that women’s reproductive role in society is important, the system produces maternal, docile and domestic identities. These identities are not natural, but rather are produced to legitimate patriarchy and existing capitalist relations. Butler rightly identifies Beauvoir as her forbearer to the extent that they both realize that sexed and gendered identities achieve stability through performance, a subject takes up these cultural representations. These are not simply externally imposed on women, for women are socialized and educated to carry out these gender identities. Again one’s gender is not fixed, stable, but rather there are various experiences of one’s gender identity. Although Beauvoir did not use the term performance she might well have, she believes women choose, at some level their gender identity from amongst various representations, norms, discourses that privilege maternity and monogamy. Despite the broad similarity between Butler and Beauvoir, Butler’s theory of how norms are reiterated and must be refused, is distinct from Beauvoir who seems to give more space to novelty, and change, further the subject is able to consciously craft a new identity out of existing forces. Beauvoir’s theory also exudes ontological assumptions, she privileges creative action and engagement in the world that furthers the freedom of all and favours reciprocity. But she recognizes that these acts of creative performance have social and political preconditions subtended by revolutionary politics. It is not simply enough for a woman to will her freedom, but her inter-subjective existence facilitates the project of freedom.

Butler configures freedom differently. The embodied subject in reiterating conventional norms, never simply reproduces them, and in struggling against the law a shift in identity is possible herein lies the possibility of novelty, much more restricted than we find in Beauvoir. Butler’s understanding of action, however insightful, has a very limited understanding of the preconditions of change. She does argue that the performance requires historical preconditions (the performative) but leaves it like that. She fails to articulate how agencies and political and social contexts can either foster or militate against change. For Beauvoir changes in the social and political fields (i.e. democratic socialism) can trigger changes in unequal gender practices. As women strive to emulate the “truly feminine” whereas others given their feminist disposition struggle against the norms of docility for a profession or a career further their freedom “The emancipated woman wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose upon her. The modern woman accepts masculine values; she prides herself on thinking taking action, working, creating on the same terms as man.” (1976:798) Beauvoir identifies women assuming “masculine values” however, she is also aware that she wants to be treated equally to men, and not become men. Furthermore while Beauvoir respects that the personal side of the political, she goes beyond the everyday, the personal to initiate change. Considering the sexual as distinct from other aspects of one’s social roles and political participation, Beauvoir avoids reducing the political to the sexual. In fact she identifies the tensions between these realms. “The independent woman of today,” Beauvoir says, “is torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life. It is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two ; if she does, it is at the price of concessions, sacrifices, acrobats which require her to be in a constant state of tension.” (1974: 775) So although working women embrace the “masculine’ value of activity, this doesn’t automatically translate into their sexual liberation, for these women are in conflict with themselves. Beauvoir describes this as manifest in a “moral tension”: living authentically, practicing freedom and resourcefulness conflict with the needs of *femininity* which in her times entailed subordinating one’s career to family needs as well as enjoying sexuality defined within

the parameters of male sexual pleasure. Femininity is manifest in “physiological sources of nervousness and frailty” (1974: 775), which can be an impediment to agency. Some very responsible and competent women submit to masochism, she says “they enjoy annihilating themselves for the benefit of the masterful will.” (1974:769) Others, like Madame de Stael,<sup>13</sup> had resounding victories on both fronts, but this was rare. Beauvoir believes men find it particularly difficult to accept sexually liberated women. Men accept equality in the workplace more readily than in their emotional life. However this in itself is deficient, Beauvoir holds out the possibility of reciprocal relations in one’s sexual as well as work relations, while still recognizing how rare it is in present circumstances. Ambitious women who pursue their careers single mindedly, Beauvoir complains, “remain dominated by the male universe.” (1974: 780) They “lack the taste for adventure and for experience for its own sake” (1974:780); they are so driven to prove themselves that they lack passion and a spirit of liberty. What we see in Beauvoir’s descriptions is a myriad of ways that women navigate the situations they find themselves in; some act more authentically given their restraints, while others more readily accept conventional social roles and identities. Distinguishing the psychic life from social norms and political roles is important to capture the complexity of liberation. Those poststructuralist feminists who see the psycho-social and political derived from the symbolic denies different social experiences and tensions between the psychic and political.

We see in Beauvoir’s writing a complex reading of the sexed body. Sexual choices are influenced by physiology as well as socially validated identities. Beauvoir insists that biological facts are not free standing, but are given meaning from within their particular societal identities. She approaches women’s gender and sex as complex social processes, not subscribing to women a fixed or unitary identity following from her anatomy or her gender roles. The category women, rather than being a fixed essence (the third wave and poststructuralist feminists glib reading) is in process and can be influenced by multiple fields and discourses - biological, social and cultural, hence multiple identities are possible. However unlike the poststructuralist who in admitting that multiplicity of selves refuse the label woman, Beauvoir thinks these women have sufficient resemblance to warrant the use of the term woman.

### **Lesbianism- a complex social body- articulating anatomy and social processes.**

Beauvoir’s treatment of the lesbian is worth looking at as it helps understand how the Beauvoirian body both mediates and expresses various diverse registers of experience without collapsing them into each other. The anatomical, psychological and social blend into each other but they are distinguishable. None of these registers are reduced to the other; although all are factored into the situation, they nevertheless remain distinct (1945, 45). Beauvoir tells us sexuality is in no way determined by anatomical fate (1976, 451) While hormones and physique prove to be important factors in producing homosexuality in certain circumstances, these factors in themselves do not determine lesbian behaviour.

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<sup>13</sup> Madame de Stael ( 1766- 1817) was French writer, famous for her novels and letters ( letters sure les ouvrage et le caractere de JJ Rousseau. A proto- feminist who was exiled from Napoleon’s France.

Beauvoir rejects biological determination and the drive theory of psychoanalysis as well as social constructivism. She says: “Anatomy and hormones only establish a situation and do not set the object toward which the situation is to be transcended.” (1976, 452) Consequently physiology and biology factor into sexual identity, but one’s desire towards certain objects and not others is influenced by social and cultural factors. So anatomy and culture both play into one’s sexuality. One may be physiologically disposed towards a lesbian identity, however one’s desire is not determined by internal processes alone, but is produced in social contexts. Men with perfectly masculine physique may be homosexual, while women with viriloid characteristics may desire woman. (1974, 452) But women might also “assume virile qualities” out of feelings of inferiority. So in addition to physiology influencing one’s homosexuality, the construction of one’s sexual desire, is influenced by social factors like inferiority. She writes: “A female of vigorous, aggressive, exuberant vitality prefers to exert herself actively and commonly spurns passivity ....a women might try to compensate for her “inferiority by assuming virile qualities.” (1974, 452) These male identified women may assume a lesbian identity.

We see here how anatomical, psychology, and the social are entwined, yet distinguishable. I think it is useful to employ Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor of the Mobius strip to understand how the body moves between these different registers. Since Beauvoir reviewed Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* for *les temps modernes* in 1946, she would have been familiar with his understanding of the movement between the kinaesthetic, tactile, psychological and social body that Merleau-Ponty establishes. Although she never used the metaphor of the Mobius strip herself, it does help us proceed.<sup>14</sup> Through a torsion or drift the inside (the genetic or psychological) moves out and the outer (the social, cultural) moves inside, rendering the distinction between the inside and outside permeable. We see the biological and genetic drift into the psychological and social, and vice versa. These fields flow into one another, yet they are still distinguishable. Here Beauvoir more or less admits sex (anatomy) is influenced by social, cultural constructs, some of which have to do with gender. While one could argue gender is sexed, as Butler does, she does not draw Butler’s conclusion that there is no distinction between these two spheres; these registers are entwined though distinguishable.

The living body integrates of multiple spheres: physiological, psychological and social. She does not prioritize one over the other, but assumes they all play a role in one’s performed sexual identity. Beauvoir’s example, she says “Childhood eroticism is clitorid: whether it remains fixed at this level or becomes transformed is a not a matter of anatomy; nor is it true, as often maintained, that childhood masturbation explains the later primacy of the clitoris....The development of female eroticism is a psychological process influenced by physiological facts but which depends upon the subject’s total attitude toward existence.” (1976, 452) Clitorid pleasure is underpinned by anatomy - the presence of erotic zones and pleasures of rubbing associated with them, but there are also social and psychological forces that factor into this pleasure or its denial. Given societies’ investment in reproducing the species Beauvoir

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough, Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* uses the term Mobius strip, as a model for the subject. However she attributes the term to Lacan rather than Merleau-Ponty.(1994, xii ) It allows the rethinking of the relation of mind and body that shows the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, through a kind of twisting one side becomes another. It also allows the rethinking of the relation between the psychical interior and corporeal exterior, not as reducible to each other, but as distinct, through the torsion or inversion, the inside moves outside and the outside moves inside.

believes there is social incentive to move women away from clitoral gratification and to vaginal orgasm, for the latter serves reproduction.

For Beauvoir lesbianism is more pervasive in patriarchal societies where existing forms of femininity involve passivity, however it is not exclusive to these societies. Since female sexuality has been produced in societies where masculine desire and the needs of reproduction have dominated; consequently, a distinctively female sexuality is marginal. Woman's failures to experience socially useful pleasures that contribute to reproduction have been pathologized by modern psychiatrists. Consequently, women who get pleasure from masturbation and fail to displace clitoral pleasures by vaginal orgasm are identified as having an underdeveloped or immature sexual lives. Beauvoir understands the profession's sexism as following logically from the male dominated society, where phallic pleasure is both the norm and is believed to embody the positive expression of the libido. Women's sexuality had not been the object of research or study, but assumed to be an expression of the male libido. Women's failure to adapt to their sexual/ social roles (ie frigidity) has been identified as pathology. Beauvoir socializes the psychological problems that women encounter. At least in part women's psychological problems are a consequence of the unsatisfactory social roles and identities that have been prescribed by patriarchal society. Women's alienation is a response to their social reality of oppression as well as their alienation from their sexuality that has been defined by male desires.

Lesbianism arises in part due to the stark and unsatisfactory choices imposed upon woman by the male dominant culture: the passive and submissive role is seen as unsatisfactory, so lesbian identity is an expression of women's effort to chose a more positive, engaged and affirmative mode of embodied being.

In particular, Beauvoir talks of women athletes and artists who scorn the servile position and the soft flesh of the ideal female body. "Many woman athletes reject this ideal of the passive flesh of a body...it does not inspire caresses, but is a means for dealing with the world. (1974, 458) Artistic women also, Beauvoir claims, may prefer it because they don't have the inclination to play the role of the weak needy woman. Beauvoir sees lesbianism as a choice, a way in which woman solves the problems posed by her condition (1974, 444). Thus it is an adaptive strategy. Woman's homosexuality is one attempt amongst others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of the flesh.... (1974, 452)

Since Beauvoir's chapter on "The Lesbian" follows her analysis of sexual initiation, and precedes the section of marriage, this graphically illustrates Beauvoir's treatment of the lesbian as a transitional and transitory phase of development. Such a reading is in fact borne out in Beauvoir's own experience. During the phony war she wrote to Sartre exposing her relations with young women. She saw this time as a period of experimentation, which is precisely how she treated it in her work – a phase prior to assuming a heterosexual life. " The homosexual affair represents a stage, an apprenticeship, and a girl who engages in it most ardently may well become tomorrow the most ardent of wives, mistresses or mothers" (1974, 455). So she also believes lesbianism is social identity. She says "every adolescent female fears penetration and masculine domination, and she feels a certain repulsion for the male body; on the other hand, the female body is for her, as for the male, and object of desire (1974, 454). She describes woman's longing for contact with

soft, smooth flesh, the young boy, a woman, flowers, fur, a child... (1974: 436) This longing expresses itself in forms of female homosexuality and is to be contrasted with the "hard, rough world of male sexuality." For Beauvoir the lesbian identity is a temporary phase for some: she describes women wounded by male lovers temporarily escaping the roughness of male domination. These forms of lesbian identity may not be necessary, Beauvoir believes, in a world of equality, however they are at present and necessary in the present.

If the equality of the sexes were actually brought about, Beauvoir insists, the experiences of male violence and aggressivity would be substantially reduced. While certain social causes of lesbianism would be removed, it will nevertheless persist as a phenomenon, for it isn't simply an effect of women's oppressive social roles. She distinguishes these forms of transitional or temporary lesbianism from those defined whose lesbian identity is manifest "with unusual strength." Beauvoir also traces lesbianism to the desire of the female/ mother's body that is never wholly expunged for women as they mature. For this reason she says, "one can say that all women are naturally homosexual" (1974: 454).

Her work was one of the first candid treatments of the lesbian. However inadequate it is, Beauvoir's boldness in treating it in this matter of fact way is to be applauded. Her treatment of lesbianism as an adaptive choice, a way in which woman solves the problems posed by her social conditions (1974: 444) is important. Further she avoids social constructivist conclusions by admitting the role hormones and physiology play in one's sexual identity. Again this demonstrates how Beauvoir avoids social determinism, which sees gendered and sexed bodies as passively determined by socio economic structures or phallogocentrism. Beauvoir recognizes the individual's role in her "self-making" and performing of her identities, but it must be underlined that Beauvoir sees this emerging from her situation; it is not a willful choice, but more an embodied (habit) practice.

What is illustrated in lesbian identity is how Beauvoir allows the entwining of biology, culture and society. Woman's embodied action is a distinctive performance that synthesizes these various registers, as seen above – biological drifts into the psychological which in turn accommodates the socio-economic and cultural. She avoids the false, yet compelling choice of body mired in naturalism or reduced to a social construction. In these accounts there is no space for the biological, genetic, or physiological. Although Beauvoir does not expend much energy developing the neuro-physiological, kinesthetic, or tactile aspects of embodiment, except in her novels, she provides a theoretical framework in which these fields could be accommodated.

Challenging gender as a unitary and singular concept - the importance of history

When Beauvoir describes women's subordination she often speaks in general philosophic terms, and for this practice she has been branded a philosophic humanist. I have already shown this label is misleading. In using purportedly universal philosophic categories to explore concrete historical situations, she begins to break down the binary oppositions of male/female that correlate with active/passive, culture and nature. We saw this in chapter 1. Further evidence of how the concrete and specific complicates these labels can be seen in Beauvoir's turn to History in part II chapter IV of *The Second Sex*. The gendered binaries of transcendence and immanence, active and passive, that map onto men and women respectively, is more complicated when one

looks at specific historical situations with their own configuration of social differences (class, race, nation and religion). She describes women's various different relations to the economy, the state, religious beliefs. Here the simple binary of passive women and active men, the powerless and the powerful, is eschewed. What do we make of this? Although women are represented as radically Other, situated as passive and docile objects in masculine culture, in their specific situation defined by their relation to the economy, the state and the law, their capacity for action is variable not non-existent. They are not simply Other- object, but their lives have various degrees of freedom, given their specific relation to the work, public life and participation

Looking at France before the revolution, Beauvoir notes that working class women had more financial independence from their husbands and were more active participants in their communities than middle and upper class women. Those women who were financially dependent upon their husbands were for the most part relegated to the private sphere and excluded from public spaces. This was not true during the French Revolution, when middle class women took up the cause of liberty and equality for women. Olympe de Gouges in 1789 proposed the Declaration of the Rights of Women as equivalent to The Declaration of the Rights of Man, calling for the elimination of male privilege. However, Beauvoir notes, there was not great sympathy for her amongst the revolutionaries, and in the end she was imprisoned and hung. (1974,123) Beauvoir does not use this example to exhort the revolutionaries' sexism. Even though revolutionary forces were not "feminist friendly", some legal changes ensued which loosened the middle class family unit. In 1792 the exclusive right of inheritance of the first born male was abolished and a law was introduced to establish divorce. This also attests to the weaknesses of a strictly intentionalist approach to history. The revolutionaries were not feminists, nor did they intend to give more freedom to women, but effects of their actions/projects did in fact do so. From this exploration of women's position in pre-and post-revolutionary France, it is clear gender is not a unitary or primary phenomenon. Women's oppression is influenced by their various positions in the economy, legal practices and political institutions.

Beauvoir's treatment of gender does not presume that there is a shared women's experience, for one's gendered experiences is affected by various factors, including class, race and sexual orientation. The effect of class is illustrated below. Beauvoir says "When economic power falls into the hands of the workers, then it will become possible for working women to win rights and privileges that parasitic women (of the nobility or middle class) never obtained." (1974,123) Beauvoir does not present a uniform picture of women's gender experience, if one's life is dominated by domestic labour; then their gendered existence is very different from those women who are wage-earners. (1974,123)

Also religion is a significant factor in one's experience of gender. Beauvoir draws attention to the power and significance of the Catholic Church. She speculates on the role that religion had on women's lives in France. Since the church denied the use of contraceptives and the practices of abortion, religious women were constrained by their faith. Those who were less religious were freer to make choices regarding their reproduction.

National identity and politics also factor into Beauvoir's treatment of gender. The place of women in French society differs in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. Not that the former endorsed women's liberation, but some reforms were made which had positive effects on women's lives, which loosened up women's lives. With the establishment of Napoleon, she

notes, the middle class family was prioritized as an institution of social order, measures to keep women out of public spaces and shore up the family were introduced. Revolutionary liberties were withdrawn. Napoleonic law abolished divorce from 1826-84; women could be killed for acts of adultery; husbands could be excused for killing adulterous wives. Clearly political regimes and political practices affected women's gendered experiences.

The complexity of gender experience is illustrated in Balzac's ideas. In spite of the progressive ideas of his times, he assumed a pro-family position, calling for women to be kept within the family and out of the public spaces. He exhorted men, Beauvoir writes, to keep a firm rein upon their wives, deny them education and culture, so as to ensure that they were not adulterous (1974:125). At the same time, although some socialists were allying themselves to feminist ideals; many were not. Beauvoir cites Proudhon as an example of one who held an anti-feminist position. Some socialists were hostile to women's increased entrance into the paid economy, since they were being super-exploited, and drove down the wages of working classes.

Class, generational, political, and religious differences all factored into woman's specific historical situation. Since working women (middle class or working class) were more active in a world outside the family and financially independent, their gendered experiences of life were very different from upper class women. Beauvoir is not naïve. She recognizes the relative privileges of those women who ran their own businesses, and the super-exploitation of women who were working in lace workshops for 17 hours per day, might be independent but hardly equally free. For Beauvoir neither gender nor class, or even an amalgam determine agency. Religion, political identities, race are significant factors. There is much that draws working class women and working class men together, as is expressed in the example above. Beauvoir does not assume a shared experience of gender as we see above, differences in class, politics affect their subjectivity. Nor is gender conceptually prior or singular. Although she refers to women as oppressed, it is not to be assumed that the experience is the same for all women- some have more freedom than do others and chose different subjectivities. While women will experience marginality or subordination in some form, the specific form it takes will be different. She believes these experiences can and should be communicated. This allows bridges to be built between women and the mobilization to transpire.

She also draws attention to the complexity of social oppressions; it is not just women who are subordinate, but aboriginals, Jews, blacks, and proletarians as well. Their experiences are in some sense structurally similar, in so far as relegate women and men to a subordinate status, however they are in many respects very different. Beauvoir's attention to plural forms of disadvantage challenges the assumption of gender as a primary axis of subjectivity.

So Beauvoir respects the complexity of women's experiences, yet she still appeals to simple cultural representations of the "truly feminine" and the oppression of women in spite of the differences that manifest themselves in their specific situations. Herein lies the tension in her thought between the phenomenological dimension, where women are portrayed as engaged concretely in their lives, and the Hegelian/Kojevean approach that portrays women as Other, as oppressed and objectified by existing relations of power and privilege. Given Beauvoir's appreciation of Marxism and patriarchy, I believe agency for her is an effect of conflictual and structural differences, as well as one's ability to navigate them. Marx and Hegel help Beauvoir

theorize the macro level of structure, whereas Husserl and Merleau-Ponty help her come to terms with how these are taken up and lived.

### Rethinking bodily structures beyond naturalism and social constructivism

Second Wave feminist debates seem to have fallen prey to simplistic thinking: either the body is natural and ahistorical, raising all the fears of scientism, socio-biology and biologism (biological weakness dictating social relations)<sup>15</sup>; or woman's body is presumed to be socially or culturally constructed and able to escape her inferior status.<sup>16</sup> In the past biology lent credibility to a stable material body; women were identified in terms of their reproductive functions and the processes associated with them, thus intensifying bi-morphic identities. Bodily processes were marked as immutable and sexed. However this is changing.

Contemporary science has challenged simple dualist (gendered) theories of reproduction, as well as the idea of the material body as stable and immutable. Due to the proliferation of scientific techniques (genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, nanotechnology), the material restructuring of the body is possible: nature is no longer conceived of as static and fixed, but as dynamic and a co-participant in action. Both Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Wilson, for example, articulate such a position. In this light, biology as a 'natural' impediment to women's agency is less of a worry today than it was 50 years ago. As well the growth of information technology, the computer, internet, is having an affect on social life - the former material restrictions having to do with physical distance- are no longer in place. Also access to knowledge is increasingly democratized with these new technologies. Cyberspace, cyberia has had a dematerializing effect and the body is more fluid and permeable and less solid than previously believed to be. On the other hand, since culture and society seem to endlessly reproduce gender inequality in their representations of women, their assumptions that they take on caring and nurturing practices, there is little reason to be optimistic that in labeling phenomena socially constructed one furthers women's freedom. In spite of feminist gains over the last 30 years, the nuclear family, "the stay at home mum" and the romantic narratives around marriage and maternity persist, as do beliefs in the evils of single parent families, single sexed couples and working mums. Deeming phenomena socially constructed - and thereby mutable - does not in itself raise the specter of progressive social change. Alternatively recognizing organic, biophysical or structural aspects of human experience need not lead to biologism, the idea that science dictates sexist social relations. We would do well to get beyond this simple-minded feminist aversion to science and technology an equally simple-minded endorsement of social constructivism.

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<sup>15</sup> The recognition that nature has a history, that it is not simply outside the social, has been a worthwhile contribution of phenomenological and poststructuralist theorists. The re-thinking of "nature as a set of dynamic interrelations" (Butler,1993:4) is found in Gilles Deleuze and contemporary Deleuzeans such as Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett. Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir's theorization of the body as the co-implication of the natural and the cultural are alternative approaches to rethinking the "natural" body.

<sup>16</sup> Myra J.Hird in "Feminist Theory on the Move Again: Exploration of New Materialism," ( paper delivered May 30<sup>th</sup> 2002, University of Toronto) believes that momentous shifts in natural science emphasize an openness and play with living and non-living matter, which warrants a rethinking of the relationship between the physical and cultural world. This has ramifications for the sex/gender distinction and discussions of the body. She encourages theorists to go "beyond a reaction against dualism."



Beauvoir permits a rethinking of the nature/culture distinction that avoids the unpalatable opposition of naturalism and social constructivism. She neither calls for a return to naturalism - the belief in biological and physiological facts that can be apprehended by objective scientific method - nor does she reduce biology to its political effects (illustrated by Foucault's theory of bio-power and treated the body as an discursive effect). Admittedly the nature/culture distinction itself is a cultural or political artifact, and linguistically or discursively articulated, yet that doesn't mean all bodily experience is socially and/or discursively constructed.<sup>17</sup> Reliant on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who presumes the existence of innate structures of experience,<sup>18</sup> transcultural bodily experiences, the gestalt, as well as ontology<sup>19</sup> (brute existential realities, and vital self organizing realities evident in the gestalt) Beauvoir acknowledges cross cultural experiences without denying that they are socially and culturally mediated. In her work we find the natural and cultural deeply entangled and deeply co-implicated.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of bodily structuration is useful in exploring the structures that are fundamental to human experience, or in Beauvoir's own words, "the conditions without which the very fact of existence would seem impossible." (1974:7) Merleau-Ponty identifies a pre-cognitive bodily organizing schema. Bodily habituation is an open structure that influences how cognitive processes and external factors are synthesized. This does not pre-determine behaviour, but it does have effects. It also allows a more complex relation to be possible between the biological and the social. He avoids seeing the body subject as an effect of, or as subordinate to, cognitive processes or external social forces like bio-power. Merleau-Ponty says:

The way a child structures his social environment is not unrelated to hereditary or constitutional dispositions of his nervous system.... internal characteristics of the subject intervene in his way of establishing his relations to what is outside him.... it is never simply the outside that molds him; it is he himself who takes a position in the face of external conditions. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 108)

The body is not simply an effect of exterior social or internal biological/ genetic processes or inner psychic forces, for the body as a conduit or threshold between various fields and must be distinct from them. The living body as a dynamic opening onto the world, is a site of these various fields, but is not molded by them. One takes a position in face of external conditions. I think Beauvoir's indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty, and her insistence that anatomical/ genetic

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler distinguishes her theory from radical or linguistic constructivism (the belief that everything is discursively constructed) (Butler, 1993: 6) She believes that such a theory denies that gender construction "operates through exclusionary means...., through a set of foreclosures or radical erasures" (1993:8) and refuses the possibility of cultural articulation. However clever this response, it is not convincing, for most discursive theorists recognize that the boundaries of the discourse are constitutive of behaviour, even if normalization is refused. Interestingly enough Butler provides no evidence of a theorist who exemplifies linguistic monism (determinism) or radical constructionism. Even if, as she claims, they simply read off subjectivity or social agency from discourses, many attend to how discourse also inversely creates those who are excluded/refused. Even if Butler is not a discursive determinist, the attention she places on language and efforts of identity formation, a la Lacan, do not adequately attend to the affects of the social fields in which performativity takes place.

<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir is most indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's **Phenomenology of Perception**

<sup>19</sup> Stephen K. White, "As the World Turns; Ontology and Politics in Judith Butler" **Polity**, Winter 1999 White's distinction between weak and strong ontology are useful in this regard; we could make use of the adjective weak to describe Beauvoir's ontology.

factors play a role in subjectivity, as her belief that there are necessary conditions for human experience, avoids naturalism and social constructivism. Attending to the structures of body experience (innate and acquired), or the organizing schemas of the body, explores the 'how' of knowing and perceiving, not the 'what'. The body subject is not a natural or fixed entity for its structures of experience are utterly social and variable. However, these structures are not socially constructed; such a construction would lose sight of their cross-cultural and innate character. To dismiss these insights under the rubric of essentialism is wrongheaded. Since Merleau-Ponty's structures accommodate a high degree of complexity and difference they neither substantivize human behaviour, nor tie women to traditional gender roles. They consequently are not essentialist in the negative sense. As existents, knowledge of structures of experience, as well as brute existential realities (i.e. our natality, intersubjectivity and mortality), as well as contingent events or facts of social existence, are necessary. Beauvoir commends Merleau-Ponty for recognizing the capacity of the body to integrate various structures, social patterns and events into human existence without producing a determinist or causal theory. She says Merleau-Ponty notes in the *Phenomenology de la Perception* that human existence requires us to revise our ideas of necessity and contingency.

Existence, he says, has no causal, fortuitous qualities, no content that does not contribute to the formation of its aspect; it does not admit the notion of sheer fact, for it is only through existence that the facts are manifested. But it is also true that there are conditions without which the very fact of existence itself would seem impossible. To be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body, which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view toward this world (Beauvoir, 1974:7).

Challenging previous theories of causality and contingency and traditional notions of inside and outside permits a rethinking of determination without determinism and essence without essentialism. Merleau-Ponty respects transcultural patterns and structures (that are bodily and socio-historical in nature) and yet nevertheless allows for fluidity and openness for change. Without supporting a strong ontology that substantivizes human nature and presumes that humans have identifiable positive attributes that distinguish them from non-human life, Beauvoir subscribes to a weak ontology that tentatively theorizes distinctive human qualities. Women, like men, she says, aspire to freedom. This, though, is not freedom as license (doing what you want), but freedom as creative engagement with others in the world. Although woman's agency is presently thwarted by persistent social and cultural patterns of patriarchy, Beauvoir believes creative engagement in the world is ontologically privileged. These ontological and historical insights tell us about the experiences and social preconditions of women's agency and can accommodate a high degree of complexity and difference. To dismiss them as universalist (Eurocentric), heterosexist, rationalist or essentialist is a glib response to the problem of human action. In fact, in the contexts of critical projects of theory after Foucault, Derrida, Levi-Strauss, Lacan and Freud, radical anti-essentialism has become de rigueur, a foundational principle of critical theory.<sup>20</sup> Such a position, I believe, is shortsighted, for it refutes any insights as culpable of scientism, whether it is a theory of innate affect systems (Silvan Tomkin)<sup>21</sup> or structures of

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth A Wilson makes this point in her introduction to **Neural Geographics**, Routledge, London, 1998, p.2

<sup>21</sup> Sedgwick, E. K., and A. Frank ( eds.) *Shamr and its Sisters : A Silvan Tomkins reader*, 1-28. Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

embodied subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir). Furthermore, it has tended to naturalize the anti-essentialist move, treating it as essential.

Beauvoir does not encourage women to master their situations nor does she endorse willful choice, for concrete freedom presumes embodied subjects intertwined in their situations and yet able to creatively express them by virtue of that very entwinement. Woman is able to make herself out of what the world has made of her. Herein lies Beauvoir's appreciation of a new way of approaching cultural materialism that allows for human creativity without voluntarism. Woman is not the source nor effect of her situation, but must take up a position vis a vis the world, for the body subject is a hinge onto the world, and strives to be open onto others and the world. The project of openness, responsiveness and project are not without 'subjective' preconditions as well as 'objective' preconditions.

Women are thwarted on a socio-psychological as well as a socio-economic level of their existence. Socio-psychological forms of passivity and other-directedness associated with conventional forms of femininity militate against women's expression of their desires for freedom and active engagement in the world. New post-patriarchal identities and narratives are required to further such action. On a socio-economic level, Beauvoir identifies a lack of participation in the economy and public life as a further barrier. If women are to be active agents, existing practices and institutions must be transformed. For Beauvoir democratic socialism (or equitable economic structures of labour and democratic processes) must replace capitalism (with its power differentials and hierarchies). However, even in the absence of revolutionary changes Beauvoir suggests purposeful engagement in the world, despite being more limited, is nevertheless possible. In pursuit of enhancing one's freedom in an oppressive situation is restricted but authentic and engaged behaviour are not ruled out of court.

#### Rethinking Biology: beyond naturalism and social constructivism

While the second wave feminists were prone to naturalism or social constructivism, the third wave – difference feminists almost exclusively endorsed social constructivism. This characterization, however, is not entirely true; towards the end of the millennium there has been a turn to a new materialism, implicit in the works of the Deleuze and Deleuzians like Braidotti, William Connolly, Jane Bennett, and scientific theorists like Bruno La Tour. The turn towards neuroscience helps us explore the physiological and chemical side of bodily being while avoiding biologism. Both Elizabeth Grosz and her non-physical materialism and Elizabeth Wilson and her rich theory of affect and connectivist theory of cognition promote a new materialism that is mobile and generative. Also, on a philosophic level there is the appreciation of post-humanist responses; using the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, Diana Coole's Dorthea Oklowski's<sup>22</sup> work come to mind. Finally the work of Donna Haraway and her work on the cyberborg; a combination of cybernetics and organism and cyberculture, avoid the simple binaries of nature and culture, organic and technological, science and social.

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<sup>22</sup> See L. Hass and D. Oklowski, eds., *Re-reading Merleau-Ponty, Essays beyond the Continental – Analytic Divide* (Amherst N. Y.; Humanity Books, 2000), 13

While increasingly complex theories of materialism that appreciate cultural and environmental factors of human development have appeared on a philosophic level, they do not necessarily inform public debate. Particularly in America, gay and lesbian activists still rely upon biological theories to explain their sexuality and justify their accommodation. Today the use of the discourse of “nature” to make an argument to guarantee the rights of unborn children and gay and lesbian identities seem to proliferate unabated. They argue that one is born with an inherent sexuality; one is born gay or straight, lesbian or transsexual. Unlike the theoretical forays into anti-essentialism and social constructivism, activists often rely upon biologically essentialist arguments. They insist they cannot be re-socialized, re-programmed to be heterosexual, so their “natural” differences must be protected as a legal right under the American Constitution. Many feminists, Butler and Rubin in particular, are unhappy with this formulation of gay and lesbian identity, for in swinging back to an essentialist identity they fail to understand the crucial role that social, cultural and political factors play in accepting or prohibiting different sexual differences. Political regimes and cultural practices that are open to differences forces have a significant role in cultivating and sustaining sexual difference. Furthermore arguments appealing to nature, settle or close down debates rather than facilitate further discussion.

The biological arguments employed by gay and lesbian activists, Rubin and Butler<sup>23</sup> believe, have conservative implications, for they have been used to consolidate rigid identities for women and gays and lesbians. While the social constructivist arguments are not without their problems, which the New Right has capitalized upon, returning to a form of essentialism is not a progressive way to proceed. Social constructivism believed in educating the population and diminishing social and legal forms of discrimination and social stigmas would allow greater expression of different sexed identities. This would have the effect of reducing the prejudice and the suffering caused by intolerance. Women’s access to social, economic and political powers appears to have improved, so social and public policies have had significant success, however gender oppression has not been eliminated. In spite of educational reform and changes in institutional practices, sexist attitudes, violence against women, assumptions of docile femininity persist. However the funding of these programs is based upon the assumption of ability to change attitude through lively and informed debate; the assumption of essential or innate identities facilitates neither. Also, the New Right and social conservatives has fuelled a backlash. Feminist, gay and lesbian politics, they argue, have contributed to the destruction of the nuclear family: deviance, delinquency and addictions have ensued, as have selfishness, liberality, incivility and perversity. And these moral failures are often blamed on broken families, lone parenting and working mums.

Beauvoir manages to avoid the dualism of naturalism (which assumes the body is natural, pre-discursive and ungendered) as well as social constructivism (which assumes the body is a psychic or social effect of discourses and textual practices). Her creative treatment of the body, as I have shown in her treatment of the lesbian, is the co-mingling of nature and culture, body and society, sex and gender. This permits her to think beyond binary oppositions and provide an interesting alternative that accommodates both the social construction of the body, a weak ontology and minimal essentialism.

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<sup>23</sup> See “Sexual Traffic,” Judith Butler’s interview of Gayle Rubin in *Differences*, Summer- Fall 1994, p.62

Unlike many second wave feminists, who ignored biology for fear of biologism, Beauvoir had little difficulty acknowledging women's biological differences, and in many cases women's physiological disadvantages, but she insists that their existence did not necessitate subordinate social relations. This is an advance over second wave feminists who generally assumed that women's bodies were the same as men's, or same enough so that the body didn't matter. Or, alternatively, treated the body as a 'coat hanger' - an empty signifier - whose meaning is socially determined. These approaches, that see the body as residual facticity, outside or prior to the social, run into the problem of occluding gendered aspects of the sexed body. For Beauvoir the biological body is not outside the social, but nor is it sufficient to understand bodily being in terms of social processes alone. Beauvoir takes on biological facts and what she calls "structures of existence" without assuming they dictate specific social relations. In doing so she avoids the determinism of biologism and the problems associated with abstract ontology. This illustrates the importance of retaining a distinction between biological, sexualized and gendered identities.

As a phenomenologist, Beauvoir starts with women's lived experience. To ground women's equality claims on biological sameness or indifference to biological difference (a strategy of second wave feminists) was not a strategy that Beauvoir pursued. Phenomenological descriptions that looked at the experiences of women's living bodies could not avoid looking at biological or sexed differences. These experiences, however, were not treated as universal or immutable in character, nor as the grounds for social relations or political practices<sup>24</sup>, for one explored one's specific experiences from one's particular grasp or point of contact with the world. Unlike many of her followers, Beauvoir had little problem acknowledging biological differences between men and women, as well as recognizing the physical discomfort, pain and social intrusiveness of these women's bodily processes. While most second wave theorists avoided discussing biological differences, assuming they were insignificant or would call for subordinate social relations, Beauvoir spilt much ink describing woman's biological inferiority.<sup>25</sup> She says "Woman is weaker than man; she has less muscular strength... she runs more slowly ... can compete with man in hardly any sport... her grasp on the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects... in other words, her individual life is less rich than man's" (1974:38). These sorts of statements have caused much concern amongst feminists, for they tend to describe women's bodies as negative and inferior to men's.

However whether they leads to biologism remains to be seen. Since Beauvoir sees the body as "our grasp on the world, a limiting factor for our projects," (1974:38) presumably having "a less firm grasp on the world" and "less steadiness available for projects" would mean that woman's body was a less competent body. In spite of Beauvoir's attention to biological differences, she

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<sup>24</sup> Given de Beauvoir's attention to biology in Part 1, it is hard to explain Chanter, Irigaray and Grosz' claim that Beauvoir denies sexual difference. Although there is some textual support for reading de Beauvoir's treatment of women's bodies as inferior to men's bodies, if these statements are read as historically specific rather than universal, the charge of androcentrism cannot be supported. These critics ignore de Beauvoir's insistence that the meaning of biological facts are not given in themselves but in social contexts. Hence biological inferiority does not dictate social inferiority. Further, for de Beauvoir biological inferiority is not an essential condition of woman, but a historically specific one characteristic of women in patriarchal society, and as such de Beauvoir welcomes its reconfiguration and its social transformation.

<sup>25</sup> Although we know that Asian men are probably smaller than North American women- what is significant is whether or not these biological facts are taken up and lived. They could potentially be a resource for feminists, but if they don't influence social practices they will not be

resists biologism, the assumption that biology dictates social relations, for the meaning of these facts, she says are not given in themselves, but are informed by society and culture. To appreciate Beauvoir's formulation of the status of biological facts, let us consider this quote. Beauvoir says, "Certainly these facts cannot be denied-but in themselves that have no significance. Once we adopt the human perspective, interpreting the body on the basis of existence, biology becomes an abstract science; whenever the physiological fact (muscular inferiority takes on meaning, this meaning is once seen as dependent on the whole context; the weakness is revealed as such only in the light man proposes, the instruments he has available, and the law he establishes." (1974:38)

Since we no longer live in a society that requires muscular strength, Beauvoir believes woman's general muscular inferiority is no longer a liability. This illustrates how the natural and social are entangled in the living body. Strength or competence are not determined abstractly, but depend upon social and political contexts. Having admitted the significance of biological facts, and given the significance of the body in human projects, she insists "these facts cannot be denied, but in themselves they have no significance." She is adamant that women's social subordination does not follow from these biological facts, for it is "the whole society" that gives them their meaning. (1974:38) She is able to acknowledge biological differences without assuming subordinate relations follow.

To understand bodily meanings we cannot simply look to how they have been socially constructed, for we must understand the whole society - biology, psychology, economics, morals. The body is neither reduced to sexualized facts or gendered social processes, but articulates both in this formulation. Thinking about the body as a mobius strip, a torsion that shifts from the biological to the social and then from the social back to the biological without a difficult transition has some strength. This strategy was pursued by Merleau-Ponty. It helps explain how the living body, an embodied consciousness, can move effortlessly between registers of experience. In considering the interweaving of the biophysical, psychological, emotional and social aspects of embodied experience, a multi-layered social body emerges. These don't always affirm each other, nor does it assume unproblematically blend, for dissonance between layers is possible.

The second wave strategy of bracketing the body led to social constructivism, an optimism that biology and its immutable nature didn't matter, for it was social relations that had to be changed to liberate women. This strategy had the down side of ignoring biology, of presuming that biology would dictate women's inferiority. The other shortcoming of social constructivism was that the body was assumed to be infinitely open to be re-written by cultural and social practices. In describing the physical effects of sexed bodies, Beauvoir does not naturalize the sexed body, but nor did she assume these patterns or biological facts were arbitrary as Butler does. Biological facts do not determine women's projects, but they are not without effects on female subjectivity. Beauvoir tells us "Most women - more than 85% show more or less distressing symptoms during their menstrual period, pain in the abdomen is felt, glandular instability brings on pronounced nervous instability." (1974, 32) It is not surprising, she tells us, that it has come to be known as the "curse." She describes pregnancy "under normal circumstances of health and nutrition, as not harmful to the mother; [but] with loss of appetite and vomiting.... loss of minerals....metabolic

over activity excites the endocrine system; the sympathetic nervous system in state of increased excitement; it can be a fatiguing task of no individual benefit to the woman but on the contrary demanding heavy sacrifices.” (1974, 33) Further, she asserts that childbirth can be “ dangerous and painful.” (1974, 34) Given the array of female bodily crises that Beauvoir describes, it is not surprising that women experience “their body as a painful alien thing.” Nor is it surprising that Beauvoir describes “the male [as] infinitely favored, his sexual life is not in opposition to his existence as a person.... biologically it runs an even course, without crises and without mishap.” (1974:36) By correlating biological facts with physical and emotional affects, cross cultural patterns of painful, disruptive and restrictive experiences emerge. Attention to these facts, the situation, social/ cultural meanings avoids the implicit voluntarism which follows from a hyper-constructivist position which assumes bodies can be infinitely re-signified or transfigured. The disruptiveness or alienation that women experience in their bodily processes is worth noting. Bodily processes do not dictate social norms or social practices, but nor are these persistent patterns and meanings arbitrary.

From all this talk of “biological facts,” one might construe that Beauvoir lapses into naturalism, insisting upon ungendered ahistorical scientific facts. This, however, is not the case. In a careful reading of Book One of **The Second Sex**, Beauvoir reports that some biologists and psychoanalysts have produced androcentric interpretations of the female body. Far from producing neutral, objective knowledge, these scientists often replicate the values of patriarchal culture. Beauvoir reveals the bankruptcy of “certain materialist savants ...who have engaged in trifling discussions regarding the absolute and relative weight of the brain in man and woman - with inconclusive results.” (1974:37) She rejects these efforts to scientifically and ‘objectively’ prove that women’s bodies are more infantile, less advanced than men’s. She draws attention to science as gendered, but does not dismiss scientific study as useless.

Beauvoir is indebted to Husserl’s distinction between *korper* (body – as an object described by science) and *lieb* (lived and experienced body). However different these two registers are, they are not wholly distinct. For Beauvoir the living active body subtends even the scientific attitude, so objective and abstract truths are not achievable. Scientific facts often give meaning to the living body, but it is the body as lived that assumes, circulates and proliferates these meanings, so the lived or performing body, to use Butler’s term cannot be dispensed with. Although science presents itself as abstract and universal, it is historically and culturally inflected. Scientific theories are produced within societies and are not immune to underlying social differences. Since scientific theories are popularized, they ultimately inform women’s experience of their bodies. But it is equally possible that women’s bodily experience reflects cultural norms and values. This is explicitly so regarding female sexual organs. She tells us: “There are biologically essential features that are not part of her real, experienced situation; thus the structure of the egg is not reflected in it, but on the contrary, an organ of no great biological importance, like the clitoris, plays in it a part of the first rank.” (1974:42)

Beauvoir says “ biological fact are keys to studying women, but I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny, they are **insufficient** for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes.” (1974:36) Beauvoir both gives weight to the physiological or organic foundations of bodily being without falling into naturalism (biologism), and equally avoids lapsing into a simple social

constructivism. Like the social constructivists Beauvoir acknowledges that bodily processes are socially and culturally variable, yet she insists upon the exploration of biological facts or structures of bodily being. Instead of suggesting there are no differences between male and female bodies, recognizing that there are some, since they are sexually, socially and socio-economically lived, can be seen to be an advance. Since these sexual differences are in part determined by scientific and social scientific findings, and since these findings are historically variable, some of these facts can be dismissed as out of date or culturally specific. But, since **The Second Sex** was written over 50 years ago and is a phenomenological description, concerned with exploring contemporary lived meanings of femininity, female and women, how can it not be out-of-date? What remains timely is Beauvoir's theoretical approach, is her recognition that the body is not natural and un-gendered, nor a passive surface or site of social processes, but a co-mingling of nature and culture; sex and gender. In the living body the bio-physical, sexual, psychological and socio-economic fields are entwined. Such an understanding avoids the constructionism of the overly discursivized bodies and overly sexualized treatments of the phallogocentric logic of the feminists of difference.

In reflecting on woman's bodily and reproductive processes, and describing the pain and difficulties encountered therein, Beauvoir's feminist critics label her masculinist. This led Tina Chanter and Elizabeth Grosz to conclude that for Beauvoir women's bodies are an impediment to their freedom, the male body being more fitted to transcendence. This reading of Beauvoir comes, as I have previously argued from treating her pejorative statements as universal or essential statements, rather than historically specific ones. If women's biological inferiority is to be understood in social and historical contexts, as Beauvoir assumes it must be, then its negativity has to do with the existing social/ cultural meanings. The body is never unmediated, but has so far being mediated exclusively within a man-made world. Far from arguing that Beauvoir's phenomenological descriptions are male-identified, from a male point of view, I will argue that her phenomenological descriptions of these bodily processes is a feminist strategy.<sup>26</sup> Since female bodily processes have for the most part been ignored by philosophers, given their aversion to the somatic and inclination to prioritize reason, will and intention, Beauvoir's attention to emotion and affect is worthy of consideration. Calling attention to women's "messy" and unmanageable body in exploring women's particular histories, the modernist priorities are inverted, making the body and emotion the very stuff of subjectivity. However the emotional responses to the body are not irrational, unbridled affect, but do supplement our understanding of women's life and experience.

One aspect of Beauvoir's thinking that is often pointed to as a sign of her phallicism, is her characterization of vagina as a hole and the desiring women as described as "enveloped in a pale and sickly vapour"..., "her flesh became a humid and spongy moss," (BOO, 1966, 79) Helene describes herself as "paralysed by that net of burning silk, ..she would never rise again to the surface of the world, she would remain enclosed in that viscid darkness." (BOO, 1966, 80) These metaphors of women's body as plant-like and the characterization of her desire as dangerous an excess of affect has been read as evidence of her negative assessment of women's body and

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<sup>26</sup> See Linda Zerilli "A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity" in **Signs** 18(1) 1992: 111-35 In defense of de Beauvoir's disparaging statements about maternity, Zerilli argues de Beauvoir does not rearticulate the subject of modernity, for "it is a sophisticated and under appreciated feminist discursive strategy of de-familiarization" 112



desire. Helene's relationship to her body and her sexuality is primarily negative in the *Blood of Others*; she was unable to be open to others, or allow herself to be sexually pleased by someone she loved, given the pain she experiences in being desiring. She feels submerged within an unmanageable excruciating excess of affect that threatens her subjectivity. It was hardly a representation of a positive relationship to one's body and desire. In the novel, Helene begins to feel the pleasure with her partner, and then turns this into anger, outrage, withdrawal and rejection. She refuses to give into her desire and allow herself to be sexually pleased by him. In fact she kicks her boyfriend out and ends up allowing herself to be seduced and impregnated by someone she dislikes and has no interest in. This narrative reflects a women's alienated relationship to her sexual body and her desire. These metaphors of slime and mollusk also can be found in Sartre's **Being and Nothingness**. Women metaphorsing into a plant, a mollusk, a breeder, the loss of subjectivity, this is evident also in **The Second Sex**.

For centuries women's biological vulnerability, as expressed in childbirth, lactation, and menopause, served as the grounds for excluding women from political life. However, the biological and emotional affects of these processes are rarely acknowledged, and even more rarely philosophically explored. Starting from women's lived experience, Beauvoir draws attention to the physiological sources of pain and discomfort, as well as the social and emotional meanings attributed to them - anxiety, shame and public embarrassment. Menstruation, cramps and uncontrollable bleeding, which might be visible at any moment, is often a source of pain and shame. They are very rarely the subject of philosophic study. The bloated body of a pregnant woman, a sign of sexual intercourse, was kept out of the public sphere. Childbirth - the unbearable pain and horror of the splitting body - is an event that is rarely culturally represented. Aging and bodily deterioration leads to long bouts of sadness and even depression. Social meanings and societies in which these bodily processes occur are worth exploring. Again, recognizing the intertwining of the physical and psychical avoids the common alternatives of naturalism or social constructivism.

Female bodily processes are not something that only modernist philosophers, but also men and women (feminist and non-feminist) more generally, have a hard time coming to terms with. Beauvoir's strategy of highlighting them is a good one. Far from being culpable of somatophobia, I believe in drawing attention to bodily processes and their social meanings she avoids the conventional treatment of the body as something to be ignored, or treated voluntaristically as something that can infinitely re-written. Re-signification requires the politicization of identities and movements of radical social transformation, changes in women's attitudes and situations. So these reconfiguration of the embodied subject is not simply an individual experiment in self-making nor a change in one's attitude, but a collective struggle to overcome women's domination in the social and representational fields is required. Today there is much hopefulness around cosmetic surgery and organ transplant, the "natural" aging and decaying of the body can be turned around. Although one welcomes technological advances that perfect techniques of body re-building and organ replacement, at this stage the procedures are not without pain and incredible anxiety. It is not as if the body can be continually renewed without pain or financial costs. So the material reconfiguring of the body is not as easy as one would expect. Furthermore, it is rational to fear the splitting, bleeding, broken or aging body. It is also reasonable to grieve the loss of the vital youthful body in old age. In fact, anxiety, fear, alienation and grief are comprehensible feelings. Beauvoir also positively confirms Stekel's

findings that young virgins girls experience fear and terror in the face of sexual intercourse. To believe that bodily meanings are wholly social and cultural tempts us to believe in the malleability of feelings and the cultural specificity of them. Such interpretations underplay the significance of the competent body and the loss and grief associated with the aged, ill and dying body. Conceiving of the body as a social construction or cultural product tends to move in this direction.

Beauvoir believes that menopause, pregnancy and menstruation are experienced differently in different societies, for their meanings are socially mediated. However, admitting their meaning is historically variable and socially constructed, she nevertheless doesn't deny the importance of biological and sexual facts, or their various patterned affects. Nature isn't a blank surface that written upon by society - there is an immanent order of bodily being. Ontologically the body is oriented towards responsiveness or openness towards others. Further the body subject optimally engages with others and creatively encounters the world - hence the body subject's competence and vitality are privileged. This causes problems with aging or bodily disablement. Also, in drawing out social patterns of persistent pain, physiological restrictions and recurrent emotions of shame and fear – common features of bodily being – Beauvoir stresses the sedimented meanings that correlates to situations within which agency arises.

In stressing the historical variability of bodily meanings social constructivists tempt us into believing that our sexualized and gendered experiences can be infinitely re-written and re-signified. While constructivists like Butler recognize this as a difficult social process, not a matter of choice, they do not explore the social/historical and bodily/material preconditions of such re-inscriptions, whereas Beauvoir does. The sick, aging and broken body is no longer vital and engaged in the world as it once was. In seeing the body as culturally mediated, the effects of disciplinary regimes, Butler fails to adequately accommodate the transhistorical aspects of embodied experience, whether it be the reproductive body or the ill and aging body. Although she insists that the Body Matters, she does not go far enough in acknowledging this. In her desire to refuse essentialism, transcultural biological or physiological facts have been ignored. Further, persistent patterns and structures of gender oppression have been side-stepped. Performing ones gender may be limited by the performative, the historical conditions of performance, but these aren't sufficiently theorized, nor how they influence agency is not respected.

Furthermore constructivist and performative theories suggest that each repetition of gendered practices is always different, but does that necessarily mean it is creative. The ill, aging and dying body can be variously represented, expressed and assumed, but not to acknowledge or explore the situations and social worlds within which these performances take place is inadequate. In looking at the biophysical body and the structures of bodily experience (sensory-motor, perceptual, cognitive skills) Beauvoir avoids the flat docile body that is indifferent to the discourses in which it is inscribed. Free and engaged action in the world with others and vital behavior are ontologically favoured. So the decaying and dying body are not events that can be infinitely rewritten, but most accompanied by pain, grief and sadness. Furthermore, in recognizing the diversity and complexity of the social world and phenomenological experiences of emotion and the body, within which subjectivity emerges, Beauvoir avoids both the stark separations and collapsing of sex and gender, nature and culture, mind and body, the logic of the second wave

and an overly constructivist positions of the third wave. Although she herself does not appreciate new forms of materiality, her theoretical problematic allows these to be appreciated.

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